

Lewis and Clark Board Makes Controversial Move to Rescind Administrative Contracts

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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GODFREY – The Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) Board voted 4-3 to rescind several management and administrative contracts approved earlier this month at a special board meeting Tuesday evening.

The extremely controversial motion was done at the behest of three new board members, Kevin Rust, Julie Johnson and Charles Hanfelder, as well as sitting board member, David Heyen, who campaigned for the election of the other three members during elections earlier this year. Those contracts were (also controversially) approved

at the regular April meeting of the LCCC board in which they were approved unanimously – including by Heyen, who said he was “going with the crowd” when he voted in favor of approving the one and three-year contracts for members of the college's administration and management.

Opponents of the continuation of those agreed-upon contracts claimed the contracts, which reach their conclusions at the end of June, were pushed through by the previous board members without proper public notice. Rust claimed that proper notice of the contracts and their contents were not made publicly available within 48 hours of their approval, which he said makes them invalid.

“I made a public comment at a previous meeting that approving a contract before seating the new board members wasn't a fair action to make,” Johnson said following a slew of public comments denouncing the new board's decision to continue with the motion to rescind the previously approved contracts. “I'm not sure why they were approved in April when they don't expire until June. I don't believe they were passed in good faith – they undermined the authority of the new board. I understand the public's concerns. Change is unpleasant. Change makes people nervous.”

Johnson defended her actions by claiming it was to add “fresh eyes” to the contracts in order to “ensure a balance” between the board and taxpayers who help fund the community college district.

LCCC Board legal counsel Jill Leka said the motion could put the board on the defense of legal action, as she said the contracts were legally binding between the employees and the employer. She said the lack of posting the full details of the contract for public viewing within 48 hours of the vote did not negate the terms of the contracts.

Threats of possible legal liability were not the only instances of negative feedback against the motion. A period of public comment was granted and several members of the community took a chance to express their disagreement, despair and downright anger against the motion.

Many of those who took the chance to issue public comments were faculty members of LCCC. Donna Eaglehoff opened the public comment portion of the meeting by stating the contracts were legally binding between the college and its faculty/administration. She said the only valid reason for contract terminations would be due to poor performance.

She continued to express with extreme disgust how none of the board members had looked into her performance or talked to her superiors before deciding to rescind the terms of her previously approved contract.

“If it's in the public's interest, I am in the public,” she said. “I am a taxpayer, and my money goes here, too!”





Second speaker Gerald Mozur's contract was also a matter of that motion.

“Is it your motivation to make hardworking personnel worry about their jobs?” he asked the board. “Because that certainly is the effect.”

Mozur accused the motion and the overall agenda of Heyen and the three new board members to not work for the common good of LCCC, but instead show a “demonstration of power in pursuit of a business model.”

He added a statement saying most of the vision and leadership attached to the recent and ongoing successes of LCCC were due to the efforts of LCCC President Dr. Dale Chapman.

Comments posted in that group were referenced by LCCC Faculty Association President Mike Lemons. Lemons also denounced the motion of the board, encouraging them instead to seek to be informed on the culture of LCCC before making such rash decisions.

“Our culture is what makes LCCC so special,” Lemons said. “It is the passion, collegiality and commitment of those who are a part of this family. Everyone, working each and every day to do what they feel is best for the college and the students we serve. Many of us have made it our life's work to grow the institution; making it one of the most respected community colleges in the region. I am concerned that our culture may be in danger. Ours is one that allows input from all sides while examining all sides. If you are going to be critical of someone's salary, you should also recognize their contributions. And just because employees may share the same last name doesn't mean that they are not highly qualified to hold those positions.”

Outside of those whose contracts would directly be affected, other people who have partnered and collaborated with the college as job-creators, researchers and program collaborators also contributed to the push against the board's motion to rescind the contracts.

A letter penned by local business owner Jack Helmkamp, who described himself as a lifelong Republican, was read by fellow local business owner Sam Roberts. That letter strongly cautioned against the motion to rescind the contracts. Helmkamp advised the board to do what he does as a successful business owner who often jumps from field to field and experience to experience. He said they should give themselves six months to a year to understand the culture of the place before they make any rash decisions. He praised the work of Dr. Chapman in bringing partnerships between the college and several job-seekers and job-creators in the area through its many programs, including automotive, welding and nursing, the last of those he said saw the best entry test scores in the St. Louis Area after having completed LCCC's nursing program.

Other board members, such as Brenda Walker-McCain and Dwight Wertz, also admonished what they believed to be the folly of the new board members. After Johnson described three-year contracts as “too long,” she said the contracts were “average,” adding one-year contracts also offered by the college were short. She said she often offers contracts as long as five years in her position.

Wertz continued Leka's warning, adding he was fearful the motion would open the board to potential legal action from contract holders. He said the board members should take a year or two to really get used to the board before making such massive decisions.

Members of the LCCC board serve six-year terms. The three new board members were elected from the March 2019 ballot. Madison County Clerk Debra Ming-Mendoza said less than 12 percent of registered voters across the county actually participated in that election. These board members were also chosen by voters in several nearby counties, including Greene, Macoupin, Jersey, Calhoun, Morgan and Scott.

After being seated and taking their oaths of office, the three new board members immediately got to work electing officers. The four positions of chairperson, vice chair, secretary and assistant secretary were filled by Heyen, Johnson, Rust and Hanfelder respectively. The four of them voted to pass the motion, which was voted against by Walker-McCain, Wertz and Bob Watson.